

WOMEN AND NATIONALISTIC POLITICS IN ROBERT BROWNING'S POETRY: A FEMINIST READING OF "BALAUSTION'S ADVENTURE AND 'ARISTOPHANES APOLOGY"

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ABSTRACT

Using the feminist critical theory, this paper analyses two epic poems by Robert Browning telling the story of a 14 year old girl from Rhodes, an ally of Athens who was using Euripides as her idol and his tragedy as her weapon liberates Athens from Spartan occupation with its foreign comedy of Aristophanes. Balaustion here is similar to Saint Joan in George Bernard Shaw's Saint Joan who liberates the French nation from the English occupation. The paper argues that Balaustion portrays herself as a 'New-Woman' when she exhibits masculine attributes like Juliet in Romeo and Juliet, her patriotism/nationalism and her quest for her people's freedom when she liberates Athens from Spartan occupation. This paper reveals that by portraying such an active, nationalistic, man-like woman, Browning simply was paying tribute to his dead wife Elizabeth Barrett Browning who had died earlier. The story of King Admetos and his wife Alkestis paralleled that of Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Browning. Browning and his wife were fervent admirers of the youngest of the three Greek tragedians Euripides and these two epics equally show Euripides' importance as a nationalist tragedian in the ancient Greek world coming after Aeschylus and Sophocles.

KEYWORDS: "New-Woman", Feminist, Patriotism, Nationalism, Comedy, Tragedy & Politics

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INTRODUCTION

Much of Browning's poetry reveals his concern for women's liberty, freedom of action, their concern for patriotic achievements, and of course, their ability to undertake masculine roles with the aim of forging a more progressive society. This paper examines a masculine action taken by a female character, women and patriotism, and how Browning's use of language reveals his feminism. Lastly, the paper examines some autobiographical facts in these two related epic poems: "Balaustion's Adventure Including a Transcript from Euripides 1871" and "Aristophanes' Apology Including a Transcript from Euripides Being the Last Adventure of Balaustion 1875". The second poem "Aristophanes' Apology" is a continuation of "Balaustion's Adventure" as the title indicates. Briefly the poem "Balaustion's Adventure" tells the story of how the Greek leader fell from power and the gradual rise of Balaustion to power in the Greek world. In this poem Browning tells us how Balaustion, a young Greek girl from Rhodes using Euripides as her idol and weapon, refuses to betray Athens by siding with Sparta after the defeat of the Greek leader Nikias by the Syracusans. She uses Euripides' play *Alkestis* to persuade the Syracusans who want to prevent them from going to Athens and also to liberate Athens from Spartan occupation. The poem "Aristophanes' Apology" describes Athens under the rule of Sparta when the comedian Aristophanes is at the apex of his career and fame. Balaustion sees the fall of Athens in the abandonment of tragedy in preference to the comedy of Aristophanes by the Athenians. The night of the death of Euripides, Aristophanes meets Balaustion and

there is a confrontation between the two of them. Aristophanes knows that she is a disciple of Euripides whom he does not like and respect. This confrontation between Balaustion and Aristophanes is a conflict between the uses and greatnesses of tragedy and comedy. Just like it is a conflict between Balaustion and Aristophanes, it is also a conflict between Euripides and Aristophanes. During the confrontation between Balaustion and Aristophanes, Balaustion in order to show the greatness of Euripides reads a transcript of Euripides. This time it is not Alkestis in the first poem “Balaustion’s Adventure” but Herakles another play of Euripides. At the end of the conflict between the two, we are told by Balaustion that Athens has been liberated from Spartan rule through the action and influence of her husband, Euripides and above all Balaustion herself.

WOMEN AND ACTION

The title of this section is taken from a comment made by John Stuart Mill in his essay entitled “The Subjection of Women”. In this essay his argument is that if there is equality between the two sexes, there will be a lot of development in society. He writes :

The principle of the modern movement in morals and politics, is that conduct, and conduct alone entitles to respect : that not what men are but what they do, constitute their claim to deference ; that above all, merit and not birth is their claim to power and authority (1080 – 1091).

John Stuart Mill is saying that for women to be equal to men and also have access to power and authority, they should behave very well and also rely on merit. This is because many women always like to have things the easiest way. More importantly, for women to be equal to men and have access to power and authority, let them do what men do. Men are what they are because of what they do. Action alone proves whether women are equal or not to men. The action taken by Balaustion in the two poems shows that she is the equal of man and therefore deserves respect or what John Stuart Mill calls above deference.

In the next paragraphs, we will look at the story of the two poems in detail. While looking at the story in detail, we will show how Browning portrays positive images of Alkestis and Balaustion in the poem “Balaustion’s Adventure”. We will also show how Browning uses language to show that Alkestis is brave and her husband Admetos is a coward.

Stopford A. Brooke in his book *The Poetry of Robert Browning* in Chapter XV which has a sub-title “Balaustion” writes :

Born at Rhodes, but of an Athenian mother, she is fourteen when the news arrives
that the Athenian fleet under Nikias, sent to subdue Syracuse, has been destroyed
and the captive Athenians driven to labour in the quarries. All Rhodes, then in
alliance with Athens now cries, “Desert Athens, side with Sparta against Athens”
Balaustion alone resists the traitorous cry. (365 – 366).

This is How Balaustion Begins this Poem:

About that strangest, saddest, sweetest song
I, when a girl, heard in Kameiros once,

And, after, saved my life by? Oh, so glad

To tell you the adventure ! (1 – 4)

Balaustion then tells us what has happened: "When poor reluctant Nikias, pushed by fate/ Went falteringly against Syracuse;/And there shamed Athens, lost her ships and men" (8 – 10).

The state Syracuse defeats Nikias. Because of this defeat, many Athenians are of the opinion that the best thing for them to do is to abandon Athens and join Sparta, which at this time, is a rapidly growing state in might.

When this happens, Balaustion is at Rhodes, "The Isle, not Rhodes the town, mine was Kameiros when the news arrived". This act of Nikias and his defeat "Shamed Athens". Because of this shameful act, he dies a kind of "death without a grave", meaning that his people refuse to bury him as a punishment for this shameful act. His corpse is allowed to rot in the open air like that of the son of Oedipus Polyneices in Sophocles' play *Antigone*. Because of this, Balaustion says :

Our people rose in tumult, cried "No more

Duty to Athen, let us join the league

And side with Sparta, share the spoil, at worst

Adjure a headship that will ruin Greece.

And so, they sent to Knidos for a fleet

To come and help revoltors (14 – 19)

"Share the spoil" means to join the war on the side of Sparta and after get a reward. "Adjure" is a word which means to promise or swear solemnly on oath or in public to give up a belief, a right, evil ways or even one's religion. In this context it means to accept publicly to join a warship on the part of Sparta that will go and destroy Greece. Balaustion urges the revoltors : "Follow me !..." (42 – 50). Before the above action, Balaustion is still a girl of fourteen, who has never gone out of Rhodes. She still nourishes with "Illissian mother's milk". This means that she is still very young. She passionately cries to those who can hear and those who love her at Kameiros :

--- NO !

Never throw Athens off for Sparta's sake –

Never disloyal to the light and life

Of the world worth calling world at all.

Rather go die at Athens ; lie out stretched

For feet to trample on, before the gate

Of Diomedes or the Hippadai

Before the temples and among the tombs

Than tolerate the grim felicity

Of harsh Lakonia (24 – 33)

Lakonia refers to the Spartan leader or ruler. She says “Ours the fasts and feasts”, “Ours the sacred grove”/ “Ours the great Dionusiatic theatre,/And logic triad of immortal fames,/Aischulos, Sophokles, Euripides/To Athens all of us that have a soul/Follow me !” (38 – 42)

After this, she and her followers board a ship bound for Athens. When they enter the sea, a pirate ship pursues them “Panting for the good prize ! Row ! harder row !/Row for dear life ! the Captain Cried : (59 – 61).She urges her men, women, children and slaves not to fall a victim to these pirates whom she describes as “so cruel are such water – thieves”. They are very lucky to outrun this pirate ship. Seeing that they are out of danger, Balaustion says: “Seeing our oars flag in the rise and fall,/I sprang upon the alter by the mast/And sang aloft- some genius prompting me,/That song of ours which saved at Salamis. (74 – 77). This patriotic song which saved at Salamis is :

O sons of Greeks, go set your country free

Free your wives, free your children, free the fanes

O’ the Gods, your fathers founded, sepulchers.

They sleep in ! O save all, or all be lost. (78 – 81)

The above patriotic song is the same song the Greeks sang when they defeated the Persians at Salamis¹. The day that the Greeks defeated the Persians, was also a very important day in the Greek world because this was the day that Euripides was born. The Greeks defeated the Persians and maintained their civilization. When the poet says that Athens was “the light and life / Of the whole world”, he is referring to her civilization. Athens thus stands for civilization, liberalism, democracy whereas Sparta and Persia stand as symbols of barbarism. Athens was and is the seat of modern institutions and knowledge.

Balaustion says “in a frenzy” the “noble oars” “churned the black water white”. Then they see land rise, see hills grow up and see a sea-town spread itself with towers – “For here was Sicily and Syracuse / We ran upon the lion from the wolf”. Lion here is a metaphor referring to Sicily and Syracuse and wolf is a metaphor referring to the pirates. Before they drew breath, took counsel out, there came a galley (Ancient Greek / Roman warship) and hailed them – “Who asks entry here / In war-time ? Are you Sparta’s friend or foe?”. The Captain of the ship says they are Kaunians. He adds : “The mainland – seaport that belongs to Rhodes ; / Rhodes that casts in her lot now with the League / Forsaking Athens, - you have heard belike” . The Syracusans answer the Captain of the ship:

You bring a boatful of Athenians here,

Kaunians although you be : and prudence bids,

For Kaunos’ sake, why, carry them unhurt

To Kaunos, if you will : for Athen’s sake,

Back must you, though ten pirates blocked the bay !

We want no colony from Athens here,

With memories of Salamis, forsooth,

To spirit up our captives, that pale crowd

I' the quarry, whom the daily pint of corn

Keeps in good order and submissiveness (100 – 109)

From the above quotation we realise that when the Syracusans defeat the Greek leader Nikias, they take his men as captive who have to work in the quarry, only having one meal of “pint of corn” every day. They keep this men in submission.

The people of Syracuse threaten to send Balaustion and her company back so that the pirates should kill them. The Captain of the ship begs them. In spite of this begging from the Athenians, the Syracusans do not want to listen to them. When the Syracusans tell them to wait, Balaustion says :

Now, someone of the Gods inspired this speech :

Since ourselves knew what happened but last year –

How, when Gulippos gained his victory

Over poor Nikias, poor Demosthenes,

And Syracuse condemned the conquered force

To dig and starve i' the quarry, branded them –

With horse – head brands, - ah, 'Region of the Steed ! (139 – 146)

Balaustion now reveals to us the weakness of those who were captured by the Syracusans:

Of all these men immersed in misery,

It was found none had been advantaged so

By aught in the past life he used to prize

And pride himself concerning, - no rich man

By riches, no wise man by wisdom, no

Wiser man still (as who loved more the Muse)

By storing, at brain's edge and tip of tongue

Old glory, great plays that had long ago

Made themselves wings to fly about the world (147 – 155).

None of the men opened his heart, ... “flung door wide / At the new knocking of Euripides” whom some cried “Decadence !” after Sophocles that Nature be dumb. Some after the birth of Euripides : “He who himself, born latest of the Gods / Was stoutly held imposter by mankind,- ”.

The people of Syracuse know and want to know more about Aeschylus, Sophocles and above all the youngest poet Euripides :

That song was veritable Aischulos

Familiar to the mouth of man and boy,
 Old glory : how about Euripides ?
 The newer and not yet so famous bard,
 He that was born upon the battle-day
 While that song and the Salpinx sounded him
 Into the world, first sound, at Salamis –
 Might you know any of his verses too ? (131 – 138)

This is the opportunity Balaustion has been looking for and the Captain of the ship.

Therefore at mention of Euripides
 The Captain crowed out “Euoi, praise the God”
 Oöp, boys bring our Owl – Shield to the fore !
 Out with our Sacred Anchor ! Here she stands,
 Balaustion ! Stranger, greet the lyric girl. (183 – 187)

The Captain says “Balaustion, stand forth and confirm my speech !”. Balaustion is compared to an “Owl – Shield”, a “Sacred – Anchor”, a “lyric girl” and in addition she is described “as fast as snow in / Thrace has she been falling in thick flakes of him” and “Frequent as figs at Kaunos, Kaunians said”. An owl is a bird of wisdom. The expression “Owl – Shield” will suggest that Balaustion is their wisdom container or their brain. “Sacred – Anchor” will suggest that she can lead them or she is their security. She is frequent and fast. These are good qualities that portray the strength of women over men in terms of action.

Balaustion Tells us the Importance of Teaching Euripides to Syracuse :

Teaching Euripides to Syracuse –
 Any such happy man had prompt reward :
 If he lay bleeding on the battle – field
 They staunched his wounds and gave him drink and food ;
 If he were slave i’ the house, for reverence.
 They rose up, bowed to who proved master now
 And bade him go free, thank Euripides ! (171 – 177)

She describes Euripides as “The meteoric poet of air and sea / Planets and the pale populace of heaven / The mind of man, and all that’s made to soar !” To soar means to rise quickly to a high level or standard, to fly very high in the air or to remain high in the air without using wings or power. Euripides is a poet of progress or advancement. He is a solution or panacea to everything.

From childhood Euripides has been the idol of Balaustion (just like Euripides was the idol of Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Robert Browning). Before she tells her story, she asks the people of Syracuse to place her on the shrine of their God "Herakles" before she narrates her story. It is her belief that when she tells the story of Euripides on the temple of Herakles their god, Herakles will tell them to set her and her company free:

To the suburb temple, there they stationed me

O' the topmost step : and plain I told the play,

Just as I saw it ; what the actors said,

And what I saw, or thought I saw the while,

At our Kameiros theatre....(246 – 250)

Told it, and, two days more, repeated it,

Until they sent us on our way again

With good words and great wishes. (253 – 255)

When she says "To tell you his achievement as I may, / And, that told, he shall bid you set us free !". "His achievement" refers to Euripides' play. The possessive adjective his refers to Euripides. "He" in the second verse is a subject pronoun which refers to Herakles, the God of the Syracusans whom she thinks will urge the Syracusans to set them free after she tells them the play or transcript of Euripides. This is what happens.

Because of the way she narrates her story (the play of Euripides), a young man from Phokis decides to go to Athens with her. His name is Euthukles who later on marries her. Euthukles is also important later on in the poem because he helps in liberating Athens. The question may be asked : how does Balaustion know Euripides' play *Alkestis* ? She gives us the answer :

But I cried, Brother Greek ! better than so, -

Save us, and I have courage to recite

The main of a whole play from first to last ;

That strangest, saddest, sweetest song of his,

Alkestis ; which was taught, long years ago

At Athens, in Glaukinos' archonship,

But only this year reached our Isle O' the Rose,

I saw it, at Kameiros, played the same,

They say, as for the right Lenean feast

In Athens ; and beside the perfect piece –

Its beauty and the way it makes you weep, -

There is much honour done your own loved God

Herakles, whom you house i' the city here

Nobly, the Temple wide Greece talks about !

I come a suppliant to your Herakles ! (218- 232)

Balaustion tells us that “poetry is power” and when she opts to tell them the story of the play Alkestis, the Syracusans are very anxious – “All the crowd, as they lined the harbour now, / More of Euripides !’ – took up the cry”.

Because of the way she tells her story, a wealthy Syracusan brings an appreciative gift and tells her to take it but she decides to put it on the shrine or temple of Herakles. A group of captives who call Euripides their countryman sends her a crown of wild pomegranate flower. That is why she will “live and die Balaustion now”. This band of captives who call Euripides “the poet countryman” are the prisoners of Athens who were forced to work in the quarry after the defeat of Nikias by the Syracusans. She also says “one man”, “one youth” for the three days that she was at the temple of Herakles telling her story, each time she “gave a downward glance by accident”, she saw the man at the “foot o’ the temple” and he also entered the ship bound for Athens when they leave Syracuse because he had “a hunger to see Athens too”. This young man as we said earlier is Euthukles. Balaustion tells us that Euripides in Athens “lives as should a statue in its niche”, “cold walls enclose him”. He is alone in darkness and once in a while a foreigner comes in and departs. Balaustion says when she comes in, Euripides sends his sacred hand to her and puts it in her lips. She tells us that humankind does not like Euripides. Humankind does not also like Socrates who is a friend of Euripides. Socrates often comes in to hear him read and he never misses when Euripides is teaching a play.

This play of Euripides that the Syracusans want to hear is called Alkestis. Stopford A. Brooke has this to say about the play:

The story of the Alkestis begins before the play. Apollo, in his exile, having served King Admetos as shepherd, conceives a friendship for the King, helps him to his marriage, and knowing that he is doomed to die in early life, descends to hell and begs the Fates to give him longer life. The Fates refuse to lengthen Admetos’ life, unless someone love him well enough to die for him. They must have their due at the allotted time. (373)

Then there is the crux of the play : Alkestis² is to die for Admetos, and does it. What of the conduct of Admetos ? What does Balaustion, the woman, think of that ? She thinks Admetos is a poor creature for having allowed it (Brooke 377). M. M. Bozman in a introduction to this poem “Balaustion’s Adventure” writes :

A transcript or English version of the Alkestis, with a commentary which is at once Balaustion’s and Browning’s own. The setting of this transcript is full of the movement of ships, the colour of Greek seas, the light of Greek skies, the scent of her story yet exquisitely prolific islands. It holds a noble picture of intellectual passion in women. The themes involved in the “transcript” and commentary

themselves are too manifold... (XII).

M. M. Bozman tells us the origin and the scheme of this poem "Balaustion's Adventure".

The scheme of the first is this. Following a passage in Plutarch, Browning takes for heroine a Greek girl, Balaustion, a native of Rhodes, who after the defeat of the Greek navy under Nikias, refuses to follow the populace in deserting the sinking star of Athens for the rising and brutal power of Sparta, fled by sea with other like-minded, and found favour with the Syracusans by "singing the songs of Euripides". Browning imagines that Balaustion is telling her tale in after years and puts into the mouth of a young girl burning with passion for the highest poetic and cultural ideas of her race as embedded in the works of Euripides. (XI – XII)

M. M. Bozman's view that the "English version of the *Alkestis* with a commentary which is at once Balaustion's and Browning own" is shared by Stopford A. Brooke.

In *Balaustion's Adventure* she tells her tale, and recites, as she did at Syracuse, the *Alkestis* to her four friends. But she does more; she comments on it, as she did not at Syracuse. The comments are, of course, Browning's, but he means them also to reveal Balaustion. They are touched throughout with a woman's thought and feeling, inflamed by the poetic genius with which Browning has endowed her. Balaustion is his deliberate picture of genius, the great miracle (372).

In Greece, as in Italy, women mature quickly. Balaustion is born with that genius which has the experience of age in youth and the fire of youth in age. She has all the Greek capacity, a thorough education, and that education also which came in the air of that time to those of the Athenian temper (Brooke 370).

In this transcript or play of Euripides – *Alkestis*, Alkestis, Admetos' wife accepts to die in his place on the condition that he should never remarry. She does not want to bring a step-mother "new-comer" or "step-dame" who will maltreat her children. She refers to this "new-comer" / "step-dame" as a "viper" – step-mothers are generally wicked and hostile to the children of the deceased wife. Alkestis knows she is better than any step-mother who can replace her "who being a worse wife than I". She also tells Admetos to play the role of the mother to her two children: "Be mother to my orphans! wed the one / To a kind wife, and make the other's mate / Some princely person": (586 – 589). Admetos should particularly take care of the girl-child who has no protector now that she Alkestis is to die. The boy has a protector who is like a tower to whom he can speak to and receive answers. She wonders how the girl's virginhood will conclude itself fittingly in marriage as she the mother is not around to help her to do so. Alkestis also laments on the fact that she will not be around to listen to the girl's cries during childbirth when the presence of her mother is very necessary nor when she will be wedding. We are now told that Alkestis married Admetos a virgin: "O bride-bed, where I loosened from my life / Virginity for that same husband's sake / Because of whom I die now-fare thee well". (600 – 602). That is why she wants Admetos to protect her daughter so that she can go to marriage as a virgin like her. Feminists are very interested in the image of the virgin. The true woman to them is a virgin. No married woman can represent the female world, for she belongs to her husband. The idea of woman must be represented by a virgin. Most radical feminist hate marriage because the very fault of marriage is that the woman does belong to the man instead of forming a whole with him which is represented by him but by the two of them. We are also told that Alkestis was an orphan given to Admetos as a wife.

When Alkestis accepts to die for Admetos, Admetos takes a three-sided vow that he will not remarry. He first swears to his wife that he will never do such a thing: "Fear not! And, since I had thee living, dead / Alone will thou be

called my wife : no fear/That some Thessalian ever styles herself/Bride, hails this man for husband in thy place !” (838 – 841).

Alkestis reminds the children of Admetos’s vow that he will never wed another woman to be over them and as such dishonour her. Admetos is reminded by his subjects that if he does that all his subjects and offsprings will hate him. The king should take note of this, his subjects warn him.

Admetos knew that Alkestis was destined to die for him because he signed the pact. He knew that his wife had to die to save him. He has to be strong to face this action but he is not. We see him very weak. We see him crying as if to say he did not know this and did not sign this pact. He is only reaping what he planted. “.... What was new/In this announcement, that his wife must die ?/What particle of pain beyond the pact/He made, with eyes wide open, long ago/Made and was, if not glad, content to make !/Now that the sorrow, he had called for, come./He sorrowed to the height.....” (889 – 895). Admetos expresses regret for his act. He wished he had not allowed his wife to die. He is now a laughing stock. He wishes to die: “To keep this pact, I find surpass my power :/Rescind it, Moirai ! Give me back her life, /And take the life I kept by base exchange !/Or, failing that, here stands your laughing-stock” [897-900].

This act of Alkestis brings a serious conflict and confrontation between Admetos and his father Pheres. Admetos attacks his father and his mother who having enjoyed their lives and are old now, refuse to die for him. Pheres defends himself. He tells his son that every woman or man must carry her or his cross. He will not carry his cross because he cannot also carry his.

Pheres reminds Admetos that he, “a Thessalian, from Thessalian Sire / Spring and” is “born legitimately free?”. Admetos is too arrogant and his words are those of a youngster: “I gave thee birth indeed and mastership/I’ the mansion, brought thee up to boot : there ends/My owing, nor extends to die for thee !/Never did I receive it as a law/Hereditary, no, nor Greek at all,/That sires in place of sons were bound to die./For, to thy sole and single self was thou/Born, with whatever fortune, good or bad” (1509 – 1516). Pheres tells Admetos that he is “impudent”. He avoided death and slain his wife and now he wants to call him a coward. This is unfair: “.... ! Comprehend !/That, if thou lovest so that life of thine,/Why, everybody loves his own life too :/So, good words henceforth ; If thou speak us ill/Many and true an ill thing shall thou hear !” (1540 – 1544). He tells Admetos that if he had died for him, he would have made a serious mistake because “our duty is to live one life, not two !”. Admetos tells him that he will die infamous. Pheres replies that once dead, whether famous or infamous, he will not care. Admetos sends away his father to preoccupy himself with his dead wife. Pheres leaves but tells his son that since he killed his wife, he has an account to render to “Those kinsfolk by the marriage-side !” He says Alkestis’ brother, Akastos may be classified a beast “if he omit / Avenging upon thee his sister’s blood !”. The poet reveals that the two of them are selfish. Admetos tells his father that when he dies, he will not bury him because he refused to die for him in his old age. This disagreement has gone to extremes.

When Alkestis is about to die and be buried, there is total weeping in the house of King Admetos. Herakles arrives and in spite of this tense atmosphere, Admetos accepts to house him. Herakles because of this hospitality of Admetos, later on goes and fights with Death and brings back Alkestis from the World of the Dead. To J. M. Cohen, “It is love, and not Hercules(Herakles), who wrestles with death for Alcestis(Alkestis), and brings her back to her husband in the Upper world” (123 – 134). To Brooke “As Alkestis is the heroine of self-sacrifice, Admetos is the hero of hospitality” (373).

When Herakles brings back Alkestis, he does not say that she is the one. He tells Admetos to take her and keep in his house. He won her in a contest. Admetos does not want to take her in because she is a virgin and too young. He does not also want to break his vow with Alkestis. Thirdly, the woman resembles Alkestis. Herakles insists that he should take her in and he does. Now he reveals to him that she is Alkestis: ".... Till Herakles must help :/Assure him that no spectre mocked at all ;/He was embracing whom he buried once./Still, - did he touch, might he address the true, -/True eye, true body of the true live wife ?" (2403 – 2407).

Admetos is very happy and thanks Herakles the son of Zeus who is the only one who can do such a thing . Herakles urges him to take Alkestis in and be as hospitable as he had been in the past and leaves him. Balaustion now ends the story of Alkestis with the moral of this play which is that God arranges many hopeless matters and what we expect that cannot happen like Alkestis dying and coming back to live are the things that God surprise us with. She is very angry because this play did not win even the second prize. Sophocles won all the first two prizes. Sophocles even plagiarized this play.

Euripides' play has been described as a "tragi-comedy". This is because the heroine Alkestis dies and comes back to live again before dying again. Alkestis dies and comes back to live with Admetos. That is why Admetos says in the poem that : "For we are minded to begin a fresh / Existence, better than the life before ; / Seeing I own myself supremely blest".

A close reading of Alkestis reveals that Browning uses positive words to describe Alkestis and even words to show her bravery. On the other hand she uses negative words of cowardice to describe Admetos who is afraid to die. There are many positive words to describe Alkestis in this play . This is a list of these positive words verbatim : "To all, conspicuously the best of wives / That ever was toward husband in this world !", "Sole wife, of all the wives "neath the sun wide / For glory and for goodness !" - ...", "What kind of creature should the woman prove / That has surpassed Alkestis ? - ...", "She washed with river-waters her white skin", "At all to that skin's nature, fair to see", "...this best of women,...", "The consecrated lady", "Husband, the boast remains permissible / Thou hadst a wife was worthy ! and to you / Children ; as good a mother gave you birth", "..., the best – oh, best by far / Of womankind ! For thee, Alkestis Queen / Many a time those hauntings of the Muse / Shall sing thee to the seven-stringed mountain shell", "So wonderful a wife", "O best of wives, one woman in the world !", "The noblest of all women as a wife". Alkestis to the poet has even become a goddess : ".... So, this was she, then, died of old/To save her husband ! now, a deity/She bends above us. Hail benignant one !/Give good !" Such voices so will supplicate" (2146 – 2149).

To show her bravery, the poet writes : "Oh, thou hast lost a brave wife : who disputes ?" The day that she is to die, she takes all her children in her arms, and embraces them, shakes hands with all the "household servants" and the mistress as if to say that there is no problem. She only cries secretly in her private bedroom. On the other hand, the poet describes Admetos as somebody afraid to die: "When king Admetos went his rounds, poor soul/A – begging somebody to be so brave/As die for one afraid to die himself –" (1724 – 1726). In the poem the poet describes Admetos as : "... Though he wept / Plenteously...", "Admetos sobbed", "So he stood sobbing". "And when they questioned of Admetos, 'well – /Holding his dear wife in his hands, he weeps /Entreats her not to give him up" (626 – 628).

In the second poem "Aristophanes' Apology", Balaustion, now a wife of Euthukles and a mature woman, speaks

again when Athens “light and life of the world” lies under the heel of Sparta. She tells us the evils and consequences of the fall of Athens and the rise of Sparta. Athenians are now slaves to the Spartans. Artificial walls have now replaced their strong walls. Athenians are now “terror-stricken populace”. As a result, we have quack priests, sham prophets, parasites, rattlers, braggarts, sophists, rhetoricians, demagogues, “argument” has become “dumb” and “authority a jest”. There are now many prostitutes in Athens – “Athenian harlotry takes laughing care”. These prostitutes are promoted by men “pimps”. A pimp is a man who controls prostitutes and lives on the money they earn. A woman who does this is a bawd. Sparta brings many bad things including prostitution and pimps. Prostitution is a preoccupation of many feminists. Ellen Bonaparth in *Women, Power and Policy* says “prostitution for many women is a choice, based on the inability to earn comparable incomes by other means”. “Prostitution cannot occur without two parties” (166). Men are the cause of prostitution. This is also the opinion of Julie A. Matthaei in *An Economic History of Women*. “Prostitution was a creation of the particular sexual needs of men in the nineteenth century, the insistence of many wives, on abstinence, along with the conception of man’s sexuality as limitless, uncontrollable, and impersonal, sustained a lively prostitution” (202).

Balaustion for many years, has been the friend of her girlhood idol Euripides. She sees the justice of the gods in the downfall of Athens which has preferred the comedy of Aristophanes to the high things proclaimed by Euripides. On the very night that news comes of the death of Euripides, Balaustion meets Aristophanes with the crowd of companions. There is controversy between them, and Browning puts into the mouth of Aristophanes a magnificent defence of the comedian’s view of art and life. The poem is a grand exposition of the rival meaning and the greatnesses of tragedy and comedy.

Aristophanes argues that comedy brought freedom to Athens. To Balaustion who confronts him. Comedy is bad because it corrupts the youth and insults women : “such insult cast on female character”. Tragedy deals with heroes, high people in society while comedy deals with riff-raff or rag-tag. We also know that tragedy originated from Athens and comedy came from outside as Aristotle points out in the *Poetics*. That is why comedy in this poem is associated with Sparta, an outside, occupying force. With Spartan occupation, we have comedy with all its trivialities unlike tragedy with all its seriousness. Stopford A. Brooke reminds us that : “To comprehend it fully, one must know a great deal of Athenian life and the history of the Comic Drama. It is the defence of Aristophanes of his idea of the business, the method, and the use of comedy. How far what he says is Browning speaking for Aristophanes, and how far it is Browning speaking for himself, is hard to tell (382). Paul Turner and Rita Patterson say that many interpreters have noted that the charges against Euripides are parallel to Victorian critics’ complaints about Browning’s own works, and that the poet’s justification of Euripides constitutes a vehement defence of his art. Between tragedy and comedy, which one is more useful or important ? Of course tragedy. It is tragedy that liberates Athens from Spartan occupation. Comedy only brought the downfall of Athens.

In this confrontation between Aristophanes and Balaustion, Aristophanes refers to her and her husband as foreigners : “Both are foreigner / The fresh – come Rhodian lady and her spouse / The man of Phokis : newly resident”. He calls Balaustion “The Rhodian rosy with Euripides”. Experience has shown us that mostly women naturalize to marry men. Here we see a man who changes his nationality because of the genius, talent and what a woman does. This is very rare and exceptional. In this poem Balaustion also takes us back to *Alkestis* “the sweet and strange Alkestis, which saved me, / Secured me - ...”

To Stopford A. Brooke, Aristophanes confesses her power to meet him in discourse, unfolds his views and plans to her and having contrasted himself with Euripides, bids her use her thrice – refined refinement, her rosy strength, to match

his argument. She claims no equality with him, the consummate creator ; but only, as a woman, the love of all things lovable with which to meet him who has degraded comedy. She appeals to the high poet in the man, and finally bids – him honour the deep humanity in Euripides. To prove it, and to win his accord, she reads the *Herakles*, the last of Euripides. It is this long night of talk which Balaustion dictates to Euthyces as she is sailing, day after day, from Athens back to Rhodes. It should be noted that after the liberation of Athens, she and her husband go back to Rhodes (385 – 386). Paul Turner and Rita Patterson in an article on-line say that “Aristophanes’ Apology” begins as a further adventure of Browning’s young Greek heroine, Balaustion. In a confrontation with Aristophanes Balaustion defends her (and Browning’s) favourite tragedian Euripides, whom Aristophanes had repeatedly satirized. Aristophanes offers an ingenious, vigorous explanation of his motives and values but Browning ensures that, Balaustion claims the higher moral and artistic ground for Euripides. To demonstrate his greatness, she reads Euripides’ play *Herakles* aloud, in Browning’s own translation.

The play *Herakles* tells the story of Herakles who goes down into Hades to bring back the hound and light. Everyone thinks that he is dead. He comes back at the time when the son of Lakos – King Lakos is about to kill Herakles’ sons, wife and father (Amphitruon). King Lakos who is the ruling King of the Kadmos kingdom, wants to kill Herakles’ sons because he is afraid that in future, they may threaten him. The Kadmos kingdom was founded by King Kadmos. He had a son whose name was Kreon. Kreon unfortunately had no son. He had a daughter by name Megara who got married to Herakles who has just come back from the World of Hades when King Lakos is about to kill his sons, wife (Megara) and father (Amphitruon). The son of Lakos, King Lakos came to power using force, a kind of “coup d’Etat” by killing Kreon and becoming the king of the Kadmos kingdom. Now he wants to exterminate Herakles’ family as most political leaders do.

As we have already said, when Herakles comes back from the World of Hades, he learns that king Lakos has already put his sons, wife and father on a “guillotine”. He goes to the palace to have his revenge. After this, we are presented with a dramatic twist of events when Herakles kills King Lakos, kills his sons and wife and is about to kill his father when Pallas intervenes. The reason for this dramatic twist is that the gods intervene. Herakles is mad because the sun (Iris) asks Lutta (Madness) to possess him. When Herakles kills his sons and wife, he does not even know that he is the one who has done this act. Even when his father tells him that he is the one who has killed his sons and wife, he does not realize this. This scene where Herakles kills his sons and wife, is reported to us and to the chorus by the messenger. At the end of this play, we see Herakles going on exile because of this crime he has committed – of killing his sons and wife. We see him leaving the Kadmos kingdom to Thebes where king Theseus has offered him a place like Oedipus leaving Thebes after he has discovered his incest crime.

M.C Howatson in *The Oxford Companion to Classical Literature* talking about Euripides writes : “Euripides’ tragedies derive their characteristic tone from the author’s departure from the orthodoxies of Aeschylus and Sophocles, his giving prominence to unconventional and traditional views and to socially insignificant people like women and slaves, as well as his reappraisal of old stories in the light of late fifth – century scepticism” (226). Euripides is thus a poet who makes women and the slaves who have no voice to speak. We can describe him as the poet / tragedian of the oppressed, a Marxist of some kind.

Talking about Balaustion, Stopford A. Brooke maintains that this is the woman, the finest creature Browning drew, young and fair and stately, with her dark hair and amber eyes lovely – the wild pomegranate flower of a girl – subtle, and true of intellect as she is lovely, able to comment on and check Euripides, to conceive a new play out of his subject, to

be his dearest friend, to meet on equality Aristophanes ; so full of lyric sympathy, so full of eager impulse that she thrills the despairing into action, enslaves a city with her eloquence, charms her girl-friends by the Ilissus, and so sends her spirit into her husband that, when the Spartans advice the razing of Athens to the ground, he saves the city by those famous lines of Euripides, of which Milton sang (389).

WOMEN AND PATRIOTISM

Balaustion's journey from Rhodes to Athens was to liberate Athens from Spartan occupation:

Saved was Athenai through Euripides

Through Euthukles, through – more than ever me

Balaustion, me, wild – pomegranate – flower

Felt my fruit triumph and fade proudly so ! (5707 – 5710)

These verses reveal that Balaustion and Euripides are patriotic folk. As the above quotation says, more credit should be given to Balaustion for this liberation of Athens although her husband and Euripides also play a part. She compares herself to a wild pomegranate flower. This metaphor shows her freshness and beauty as well as her strength.

Done that day -

That sixteenth famed day of Munuchion – Month !

The day when Hellas fought at Salamis,

The very day Euripides was born,

Those flute – girls – Phaps – Elaphion at their head

Did blow their best, did dance their worst, the while

Sparté pulled down the walls, wretched wide the works

Laid low each merest mole hill of defence

And so the power, Athenai passed away ! (5744 – 5751)

As we can read from the above quotation, Euripides was born on the same day that the Greeks defeated the Persians at Salamis to maintain their civilization. Euripides is thus a symbol of patriotism, nationalism, resistance and victory. Only Euripides can be used to liberate Athenians from Spartan rule which is the symbol of evil, barbarism and oppression. Balaustion and Euripides stand for liberty or freedom, democracy, intellectual pursuit, the good and civilization. Balaustion and Euripides are liberals like Robert Browning. Robert Browning called himself a liberal in a poem entitled "Why I am a Liberal". This poem is a sonnet.³

Balaustion is a patriot who uses tragedy as a weapon manufactured by Euripides to liberate Athens from Spartan rule and occupation. This argument is found in this poem although it refers to Sophocles :

We drop our ballot – bean for Sophokles !

Not only could he writ "Antigone"

But since (we argued) whose penned that piece

Might just as well conduct a squadron – (279 – 282)

A writer's work/pen is as powerful and influential as is a gun. The French revolution was spearheaded by writers like Voltaire and J. J. Rousseau. The above mentioned argument is linked to another in the poem. In "Balaustion's Adventure", Balaustion says that "poetry is power". This statement is very true because the Syracusans allow the Athenians to go because Balaustion can recite to them the *Alkestis* of Euripides. We see that "knowledge is power" and she or he who has it, has power. Balaustion has power over her people and the Syracusans because she has knowledge about Euripides which they do not. That is why she becomes a leader and is well respected. Her knowledge of Euripides helps her and her people.

Aristophanes addresses her as a "genius" and "gold". These metaphors show her talent and also her prominent, positive and precious role in her society. It should be noted that the dancing flute girls who came with the rule of Sparta over the Athenians and the predominance of comedy over tragedy, symbolise the emptiness and triviality of Spartan life and comedy respectively. The dancing flute – girls serve as a contrast to Balaustion. They represent the meanness of comedy and Aristophanes whereas Balaustion represents the seriousness of tragedy and Euripides. With the departure of the Spartans and comedy, things and life become buoyant again in Athens :

Now that the cloud has broken, sky laughs blue

Earth blossoms youthfully. Athenian breathes.

After a twenty-six years' wintry blank

Struck from her life, - war – madness, one long swoon,

She wakes up : Arginousai bids good cheer.

We have disposed of Kallikratidas ;

Once more will Sparté sue for terms, - who knows

Cede Dekeleia, as the rumour runs :

Terms which Athenai, of right mind again

Accepts – she can no other. Peace declared

Have my long labours borne their fruit or no ? (5389 – 5399)

We are told that Spartan rule over Athens was for twenty-six years. The rule of Sparta over Athens is like the clouds which cover the sun's light from shining. It represents "war- madness" and "one long swoon". Now that Balaustion has ended it, Athens "wakes up", "laughs", "blossoms" like a youth. These words denote liveness on the part of Athens.

BROWNING'S ACHIEVEMENT IN THE EPICS

When we read "Balaustion's Adventure" and "Aristophanes' Apology", we have the impression that Browning uses these two poems especially the figure of Balaustion to convey some messages or lessons about his "New-Woman".

Balaustion is used in this poem as a role-model for women to follow. Through her, we learn that a woman no matter her success and intellect, *still* needs a man to complete her life. This is a liberal feminist standpoint which is that of Robert Browning. Like Alkestis, Balaustion is more powerful and influential than her husband but she still needs him. The story of Balaustion violates the separate sphere doctrine / philosophy of the Victorian period whereby the man was the active, public, leader and the woman the passive, domestic and the led. Balaustion leads the action and is accompanied by her husband and the others. The story of Balaustion also violates the prejudicial statement “that woman would degrade politics, and politics would degrade woman” in *The Feminist Papers : From Adams to De Beauvoir* (Rossi 465). Balaustion’s story equally challenges Milton’s statement in *Samson Agonistes* where he writes :

Dalila: In argument with men a woman ever goes by the worse, whatever be her cause

Samson: For want of words, no doubt, or lack of breath

(Belsey and Moore 133)

In these two poems we see Browning allow the female heroine to speak unlike in his other poems where men speak for women using the dramatic monologue.

Browning’s language in “Balaustion’s Adventure” and “Aristophanes’ Apology” reveals his feminism. In this section of this thesis, we will show how Browning uses language to present the image of the “New-Woman”.

The story of Alkestis and Admetos violates a well-known gender role : men are usually presented as courageous and women as cowards. In this story the man who ought to be the courageous creature is portrayed as a coward while the woman who ought to be a coward is portrayed as the courageous. Admetos is afraid to die. His wife Alkestis is not afraid to die. King Admetos’ father – Pheres, recognising the courageous nature of this woman at last says of her :

By daring such a feat, that female life

Might prove more, excellent than men suppose

O thou Alkestis ! Out he burst in fine

Who while thou savedst this my son, didst raise

Also myself from sinking – hail to thee !

Well be it will thee even in the house

Of Hades ! I maintain, if mortals must marry,

This sort of marriage is the sole

Permitted those among them who are wise ! (1388 – 1396)

Admetos later on says:

... Since death divides the pair

‘T is well that I depart and thou remain

Who wast to me as spirit is to flesh:

Let the flesh perish, be perceived no more

So thou, the spirit that informed the flesh,
Bend yet a while, a very flame above
The right I drop into the darkness by,
And bid remember, flesh and spirit once,
Worked in the world, one body, for man's sake (2626 – 2634)

From the above excerpt, we find out that the man is the flesh and the woman is the spirit. Most of the religions on earth accept that the soul or spirit is the most important part of the human being. Meister Eckhart, a fourteenth century Dominican who preached to nuns said "woman is the most noble way to address the soul, and it is nobler than virgin". "The soul was said to be feminine" (Assiter 46). The image of the man as the flesh and the woman as the spirit is very crucial in this poem "Balaustion's Adventure" of Browning and Western thinking in general because it shows the violation of an established patriarchal tradition by Browning. T. S. Eliot in his poem, "La Figlia Che Piange" (Weeping Girl), compares two lovers to this image of the flesh and the spirit. In this poem, the woman is the flesh, and the man is the soul. Burton Raffel in his book *T. S. Eliot* accused him of male chauvinism, antifeminism and misogyny because to Eliot the woman is the flesh or body and the man is the soul or mind. He writes: "T.S. Eliot in *The Waste Land* has been attacked by many feminists. He portrays the females in this poem as pathetic, sinister, ragged and empty". Virginia Woolf in *To the Lighthouse* valorizes emotion at the expense of intellect. She has not violated any binarism. Women have always been presented as emotional and men as intellectual. Her novel can thus be read as the conflict between emotion and intellect – Mrs Ramsey and Mr Ramsey – won by the emotion.

In "Fairytale : Revising the Tradition" Tess Cosslett shows us the way to make a fairytale or any story feminist : "The next stage or rewriting would be actually to change the story. The simplest way is by mere reversal ; the genders get reversed, princes get to do what princesses usually do, and vice versa, princesses get to kill dragons, rescue princes ; princes are passive, feeble" (85). Browning presents to us Admetos who is a coward and Alcestis who is courageous. Admetos is the flesh and Alcestis is the soul. Genders roles are reversed. Browning is an expert in doing this kind of reversal we have talked above. He does this in his poem "The Glove". "The Glove" is another of these tales – a good example of the brilliant fashion in which Browning could, by a strange Kaleidoscope turn of his subject, give it a new aspect and a new ending. The world has had the tale before it for a very long time. Every one had said the woman was wrong and the man right ; but here, poetic juggler as he is, Browning makes the woman right and the man wrong, reversing the judgment of centuries (Brooke 262).

As Helene Cixous has rightly pointed out in her essay "Sorties : Out and Out : Attacks / Ways / Out / Forays", a close look at the history and nature of western philosophy, religion, metaphysics and linguistics, reveals that western thought operates in dualism or binary opposition : Activity / passivity, head / emotion, head / heart..... just to name but a few. Some feminist scholars like Carolyn Stone, Mary Eagleton, Alison Assiter, Hartsock Nancy C.M, Simone de Beauvoir, Borman, Quarm and Gide Onse, and Terry Eagleton have added : public / domestic, subject / object or predicate or other, mind / body, reason / emotion, dominant / quiet, proper / improper, authority / obedience, right / wrong, good / evil, knowledge / ignorance⁴... corresponding as they do to the underlying opposition man / woman. Each opposition can be analysed as a hierarchy where the "feminine" side is always seen as the negative, powerless instance. When we look at the above-mentioned binarisms and the women and the men in the two epics "Balaustion's Adventure" and "Aristophanes'

Apology” we realise that Balaustion and Alkestis are not passive, domestic, object or other, emotional, improper, wrong “obedient” and ignorant. They are rather active, public, subjects, reasonable, proper, right, authoritative and knowledgeable. Their husbands are the ones who are “domestic”, object, “passive”, emotional improper, wrong, obedient and ignorant.

A reviewer in the *The Spectator* said this of *Alkestis* and Browning : “... finally, he is mindful of Euripides’ fancy for putting a woman in the front of the battle in this recast of the *Alcestis* which he has put into the mouth of a girl of Rhodes ; and in the selection of *Alcestis* – a woman with whose self-sacrifice and whose slight scorn for the man for whom she laid down her life. “Modern thought” is thoroughly well disposed to sympathise (*The Critical Heritage* 360).

The action of *Alcestis* should not only be read as an act of self-sacrifice. It can and should be read as an act of bravery. Brooke writes. “The position Balaustion takes up with regard to self-sacrifice is far more subtle, with its half-Christian touches, than the Greek simplicity would have conceived” (374). In Richard Aldington’s translation of Euripides’ play, it is written : “Alcestis has a more important function since her character throws that of her husband into higher relief. She herself meets her end with fortitude, breaking just enough at the very last moment so that her portrayal becomes convincing. She manages, however, to be calm and matter – of fact, in striking contrast to Admetus when in his egotism and sentimentality he begins to lose control of himself. As the play advances a sharper and sharper light is thrown upon him... The significance lies in the study of self – sacrifice and its implications. There is nothing but praise for Alcestis’ act,...” (675 – 676). Alcestis’s act should not also be seen as “maternal altruism”, a term coined by the feminist Anne Whitehead “women commonly prioritise the interest of other family members above their own well being” (Sweetman 2). Alcestis is courageous, not altruistic.

In the conflict between Balaustion and Aristophanes, Aristophanes asks her :

So, he taught you tragedy !

I always asked “Why may women act ?”

Nay, wear the comic visor just as well ;

Or better, quite cast off the face disguise

And voice – distortion, simply look and speak

Real women playing women as men – men.

I shall not wonder if things come to that

Some day when I am far enough

Do you conceive the quite New Comedy

When laws allow : laws only let girls dance

Pipe, pasture – above all, Elaphionize

Provided they keep decent – that is dumb. (839 – 850)

Browning uses Aristophanes as a means of attacking the discrimination women are subjected to by the laws which oppress them. The roles of the women were played by men. From the above quotation, we realise that at times women,

when they are even allowed to play their roles, are required to disguise and distort their voices unlike men who are not required to do this. Aristophanes had foresight. He foresaw women playing their roles as men without any restrictions. That is what we see today. This came with what he calls the New Comedy⁵. New comedy is an expression which represents a present age like ours when women have no restrictions. Women as he says in the above quotation, were allocated inferior places on the stage where they only danced, piped, postured, and elaphionized and were not allowed to play important roles where there was dialogue and action. He uses the metaphor "dumb" to express this inferior position of women. New comedy is thus a metaphor for a free society like the Victorian society and ours which allows women to be women with no restrictions by laws which oppress them.

Balaustion after her debate with Aristophanes says :

Having thus drawn sky earthwards, what comes next

But dare the opposite, lift earth to sky?

Mere puppets once, I now make womankind

For thinking, saying, doing, match the male.

Lift earth? I drop to, dally with, earth's dung !

Recognize in the very slave – man's mate,

Declare him brave and honest, kind and true,

And reasonable as his lord, in brief

I paint men as they are – so runs my boast –

Not as they should be : paint – what's part of man

Women and slaves – not as, to please your pride,

They should be, but your equals, as they are. (2155 – 2166)

From the above quotation we can bring out four lines which are very important : "Mere puppets once, I now make womankind / For thinking, saying, doing, match the male", and "Women and slaves – not as, to please your pride / They should be, but your equals as they are." These are robust feminist statements. She uses womankind to replace the usual and expected patriarchal generic mankind. With the use of womankind, we are made to be aware that a word like womankind exists which is the equivalent of mankind and which is usually sidelined. Women also exist as a group. The verse "For thinking, saying, doing, match the male" is pregnant with meaning. The word thinking means women are equals of men intellectually. We think with the head which also means that women are rational in the rational – irrational dualism or binary thinking operation. Not only men think, women also think or use the intellect. "Saying" suggests or means that women are also good speakers or orators. Women can also argue like Balaustion has done in this poem convincingly "Doing" is the present participle which means what a man can do, a woman can also do and even better as some feminists have said. The present participles "thinking, saying, doing" when combined with the expression "match the male" convey one message – equality. This is further reinforced when she says "women and slaves" ... / They should be, but your equals, as they are". These lines convey one message – all men and women are born equal, all of them enjoy human rights. Women and slaves should not be seen as inferior to men. What a man has, a woman and a slave have. Physically all of

them are equal and the same. Only pride, culture and mentality make us label some people as inferior. The use of the modal auxiliary “should” is very crucial. In English other words which express obligation are “have to”, “must”, “need to” and “ought to”. “Must” and “have to” are synonyms because they express strong obligation. “Ought to”, “need to” and “should” express weak obligation. The use of the word “should” means that it is something which is serious and urgent. When the poet writes “having thus drawn sky earthwards, what comes next / But dare the opposite, lift earth to sky? / Mere puppets once”. These lines prepare us to the powerful feminist statement which we have analysed above. Here Browning has done what we analysed earlier in this section : change the position of the binary opposition or dualism. The man is the sky and the woman is the earth. The poet has changed this. The woman has taken the place of the sky and the man that of the earth. That is why he says women who were once puppets are no longer puppets.

There is every reason to think and say that King Admetos and Euthukles have much of Robert Browning just like Balaustion and Alcestis have much of Elizabeth Barrett Browning. The first poem “Balaustion’s Adventure” was suggested and imposed to Browning by Countess Cowper. That is why the poem is dedicated to her : Although the poem is dedicated to her, Browning did not write it for her. Browning wrote these two epics after the death of his wife. He wrote these two poems as a kind of tribute to his death wife. Critics all agree that the figure of Balaustion stands as Browning’s conception and tribute to his dead wife Elizabeth Barrett Browning.

In an unsigned review in *The Saint James Magazine* one critic wrote : “Take Balaustion herself, for instance, she was a legend, a pretty old tradition, that was all. Now she is, she exists, she has an individuality, a personality that can never be obliterated, or taken away from her...” (361). Browning remained faithful to his dead wife Elizabeth Barrett Browning by not remarrying. J. M. Cohen writes : “The colour of the poem is not Greek but of nineteenth century. Admetos’ action in accepting Alcestis’ sacrifice is excused and explained not by the fact that he was obeying the instruction of Apollo, but by his promise to remain faithful to Alcestis after her death and to take no other wife : a justification very far from the spirit of Euripides” (124). “His feelings also dictate the form of Admetus’ speech over his dead wife, into which Browning puts all his own grief and resignation” (124). “There was a parallel, as he saw it, between his own loss of Elizabeth and the widowed condition of Admetos, whose wife has gone down into Hades, leaving him with her whole soul entered into his” (123). In an earlier quoted statement, J.M. Cohen writes : “For in “Balaustion’s Adventure” it is love, and not Hercules, who wrestles with death for Alcestis, and brings her back to her husband in the Upper World” (123 – 124). Hercules or Herakles is thus a symbol of the love of Robert Browning for Elizabeth Barrett Browning. This love brings her back to the world. We see this in many poems by Robert Browning that although Elizabeth Barrett Browning is dead, she is still living with Robert Browning. She even visits him. When King Admetos says “For we are minded to begin a fresh / Existence better the life before / Seeing I own myself supremely blest”. These verses reveal to us that Admetos loves his wife better after her death than before her death. Robert Browning seemed to have loved his wife Elizabeth Barrett Browning better after her death. The many poems he has written and dedicated to her, his loyalty to her after death, testify to this assertion. This biographical element ties in with our view that Browning’s wife helped him to portray the image of a “New-woman”. A Greek story is relevant in the Victorian feminism because the Victorian period was a period of liberalism and democracy like the classical or Greek period. It should be noted that Browning set most of his poems in the past especially in the medieval and Renaissance Europe, most often in Italy where he spent most of his married life with his wife. The author of the article “Themes, Motifs and Symbols” says the remoteness of the time period and location allowed Browning to critique and explore contemporary issues without fear of alienating his readers. Directly invoking contemporary issues might seem didactic and moralizing in the way that poems set in the

thirteenth, fourteenth, and fifteenth centuries would not. We also know from literary history that the Victorian period was the synthesis of the preceding opposing periods: the Neo-classical and the Romantic periods. While the Neo-classical writers had a tendency of borrowing from the classical period, the Romantics went to the Medieval period for inspiration. The Victorians like Robert Browning went to both the classical and the Medieval period for inspiration.

CONCLUSIONS

By going back to the Greek roots as is evident in the poems 'Balaustion's Adventure' and 'Aristophanes' Apology', Robert Browning sought to use the liberal atmosphere of the classical epoch to highlight the need in the Victorian period for not only the liberation of women but also to demonstrate that women possessed invaluable qualities necessary to forge a more progressive society. Thus, the heroines in the epics are daring, patriotic, actively involved in the politics of the day and demonstrate a wonderful capacity to lead even in circumstances that men are not courageous enough to confront.

NOTES

- For more on the war between the Greeks and the Persians, see A Junior History of Africa : Ancient Times by M. Gowder, R. J. Cootes and L. C. Snellgrove, pages 87, 88 and 89.
- Alcestis in the Greek mythology had two sons and, Eumelus who fought in the Trojan war, and Hippiasus. She and Admetos were later exiled from Phereia. Alcestis was daughter of Pelias, King of Lolcus, and Anaxibia. When she was of marriageable age, her father made it the condition of her betrothal that her husband should first have to yoke a lion and a boar to the chariot. Admetus, the King of Pherae, succeeded in this task thanks to the help of Apollo, to whom he had given aid and shelter when the god had to spend a year in servitude to a mortal. At the wedding Admetus forgot to sacrifice to Artemis and found a coil of snakes in his bed (or found the bedroom full of serpents) – an omen of impending death. Apollo again gave his help. He made the Fates drunk and extracted from them an opportunity for Admetus to escape death when it was his turn to die, if he could persuade somebody else to take his place. He could persuade nobody but his wife. Either Persephone gave Alcestis back to him or Herakles who wrestled with Death and won her back for Herakles was a guest at Admetos' house at this time.
- Source: Who's Who in Classical Mythology by M. Grant J. Hazel: Hodder and Stoughton, Kent, 1979.
- See Ignatius Nsaidzedze ' Liberalism in Victorian Poetry: A Study of Liberty in Robert Browning's 'Why I am A Liberal' and ' The Lost Leader' in JELIC: JOURNAL OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE, LITERATURE AND CULTURE Volume 4, Number 2, July 2015 at <http://www.jellic-international-journal.org>
- Some feminist scholars like Carolyn Stone, Mary Eagleton, Alison Assister, Harsock Nancy C.M., Simone de Beauvoir, Borman, Quar, and Gide Onse and Terry Eagleton have added: public/ private, subject/object, reason/emotion, dominant/quiet, proper/improper, authority/obedience, right/wrong, knowledge/ignorance/
- In the classical period, we had three comedies : Old comedy, Middle comedy and New comedy. Old Comedy is also referred to as Aristophanic comedy. It denotes the comedies produced in Athens in the fifth century B.C. The term Middle Comedy is used to describe Athenian comedy of the period C.400 – C.323 B.C (between Old and New Comedy), almost all of which is lost. New Comedy is the name given to Athenian comedy of the period (323 – C.263 B.C), that is from the death of Alexander the Great to the death of Philemon, the last great dramatist of

New Comedy (Howatson 148 – 150).

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